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ABSTRACT

University College Cork (UCC) and excluded/disadvantaged communities on Cork's Northside undertook a partnership project. The partnership process exposed real divisions and differences among the partners and stakeholders on the link between participation and partnership and on the continuum of issues ranging from the more traditionalist model of dependency-creating courses to community-empowerment development programs. The model of traditional university adult education provision and assumptions that underpinned the mode of delivery and organization were in contrast to the "lived experiences" and needs of the disadvantaged/excluded community sectors on Cork's Northside. McGivney's six-stage process of access facilitation was integrated into UCC practical community projects. The Northside Education Initiative focused on social inclusion and educational intervention based on social commitment; accessibility to all community members; opportunities for full and open participation in the intervention; and attention to the best conditions for learning to occur. Positive aspects of the socio-educational partnership were development of a cohort of adult role models in an excluded community; progressive ladder of accreditation; full partnership in program design and implementation; participative methodology; build on/with existing foundations in the community; provision of a wide range of services; share ownership of learning; and build high trust. (Contains 12 references.) (YLB)

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Universities, Partnership and the Promotion of Social Inclusion: Some Issues and Developments in Ireland

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UNIVERSITIES, PARTNERSHIP AND THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL INCLUSION: SOME ISSUES AND DEVELOPMENTS IN IRELAND

Máirtín Ó Fathaigh

1. INTRODUCTION

What aspects of the university learning environment and/or organisational factors should animate a learning partnership for social inclusion between a university founded in the mid 19th Century and excluded urban/rural communities? How can the process of education promote social and economic changes towards equality of opportunity? What kind of structures and processes will be required in effecting change in the delivery and experience of education for inclusion? What role can/should a university play in facilitating social inclusion? These, and other basic questions were important considerations in the partnership project between U.C.C. and excluded/disadvantaged communities on Cork's Northside.

In the present decade Irish universities and other third level institutions have engaged in a range of partnerships, dialogues, and contacts with communities of learners different to their traditional cohorts of students. This form of partnership exercise has proven to be particularly significant and challenging when a university engages, perhaps for the first time, with a community/or communities which have, through a variety of socio-economic, cultural, historical, and other factors, acquired the dubious status of 'disadvantaged' and 'excluded'. Substantial research evidence exists that such communities suffer major under-representation in the educational 'credentialism' stakes and that community/individual career paths for the future are pre-determined early in the education process and ladder.

This article seeks to outline and examine:

- some of the issues and perspectives which attached to a model of socio-educational partnership and engagement between the University and an excluded/disadvantaged urban community.
- the background, rationale and development of the Northside partnership in Cork.
- some national issues and themes on inequality/exclusion in Irish education.

2. *PARTNERSHIP FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION: SOME ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES*

Professor Denis O'Sullivan (1995), writing on the theme, 'Cultural Strangers and Educational Reconstruction' contends that, at its broadest, cultural strangers can be taken to refer to anyone who experiences a sense of distance, incomprehension, lack of integration or alienation in relation to the cultural space in which they find themselves. In the context of partnership for inclusion the use is much more selective and may refer to the process within which the actors engaging in partnership may come from and represent such widely divergent and different educational traditions, backgrounds, attainment levels, experiences and expectations, affective responses to learning and community involvement, so as to be cultural strangers. In some respects, the university sector, which has long been the province of the socially and economically advantaged in Ireland, may be regarded as 'non-native' educational personnel or actors by representatives of the 'native' disadvantaged and excluded indigenous communities and groupings. This tension between the partners and actors in the partnership process in Cork over the past five years serves to emphasise the fact that their respective roles and contributions in socio-educational development and innovation is best conceived as positions on a broader socio-cultural process and continuum of educational engagement. The partners, as it were, are impacted upon by a combination of different influences, experiences, attitudes, expectations, anxieties and insights, a type of socio-cultural capital, which creates a background, or habitus, from which they engage new challenges and situations.

A major challenge for the university sector in partnership development may be in bringing about a paradigm shift which will be necessary to accommodate and legitimate different aspects of empowerment development programmes at the community level. Professor Chris Duke (1992) in **The Learning Uni[illegible] Towards a New Paradigm?** confronts this issue and he asks:

> *"Is it helpful to speak of a new paradigm of the university - a new way of seeing and understanding? Has a new idea of the university emerged from the chrysalis of the old, needing but a name for recognition? Do prevailing old assumptions obscure new practices? Does naming alter the reality - for there may be much in a name? It has been said that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet - but changing the terms, fostering new discourse, acknowledging a new paradigm, can in themselves assist a shift of values and assumptions which makes new practices more than superficial. Conversely, is playing with new words a form of protectionism - gestures of change to mask an abiding dominant reality?". (p. 1).*

Paradigms, if viewed as overarching frameworks or models, may be valuable in exploring some aspects of the partnership process between UCC and Cork's Northside communities. Policy paradigms are viewed as socio-cultural frameworks that govern the policy process and, it is contended that:

> *"they embody linguistic, normative, epistemic, empirical, and methodological dimensions. They regulate how the process of education is to be conceptualised; how it is to be thematised and described; what is to be defined as a meaningful problem; what is to be considered worthy as data; who is to be recognised as a legitimate participant, and with what status; and how the policy process is to be enacted, realised and evaluated". (O'Sullivan, 1995, p. 3).*

A policy paradigm, acting as a form of cognitive and/or affective filter in the interactions and partnership process between universities and disadvantaged/excluded communities, may operate as a powerful regulatory force and its boundary maintenance function may exclude community issues, themes, problems, data, and 'unacceptable' community representatives from participation and involvement in the process. Policy paradigms, if sufficiently ingrained, strong and inflexible, may assume the status of institutional doxa, and as such they may be difficult *"to effectively question or challenge since they are considered to coincide with the limits of normality and common sense".* (O'Sullivan, 1995, p.4)

The partnership process exposed real divisions and differences between the various partners and stakeholders on the link between participation and partnership and on the continuum of

issues ranging from t he more traditionalist (and perhaps, the dominant one in the university sector) model of dependency - creating courses on one side to community - empowerment development programmes on the other. Participation emerged as an essential element in the Northside partnership process, and as one observer noted *"people will not commit their own community resources, i.e., labour, energy, information, social relationships, enthusiasm, commitment, if they do not have the impression that the community education activity to which they are contributing is, to a considerable extent, theirs, i.e., controlled and owned by them"*. This sense of ownership and belonging may be in turn be intimately linked to the eventual sustainability (or collapse) of the educational partnership at the community level.

Perhaps the most important resource, community-based information, will not be forthcoming in a consistent, integrated manner if the joint effort is not built on the basic premise that 'people' too are professionals '(experts)' and on some fundamental comprehension and working knowledge of cross-cultural communication strategies and empathic understanding.

We are adverting here to radical socio-cultural and educational changes. This change and challenge is not simply at the administrative and organisational level in the university, but is at the very heart of the educational enterprise, namely, who defines knowledge? Who owns knowledge? Who decides what is knowledge and what is new knowledge? The present model of traditional University Adult Education provision, and the assumptions which underpin the mode of delivery and organisation, were in contrast to the 'lived experiences' and needs of the disadvantaged/excluded community sectors on Cork's Northside and presented themselves in stark relief during the consultation process.

	UNIVERSITY	***COMMUNITY***
	DEPENDENCY CREATING	***EMPOWERING DEVELOPMENT***
	PROGRAMMES ⟷	
(Starting Point)		
• ***Initiation***	Prevailing ideology, doxa of the educational institution	Open agenda, needs identified in community
• ***Focus***	Output - awards measured	Problem solving
• ***Style of Communication***	Top-down. One-way. Impersonal	Participatory, two-way, listening and sharing Personal, interpersonal, intrapersonal
(Direction)		
• ***Thrust of Development***	Existing status quo or top-down	Built from bottom-up. Recognises every participant
• ***Ownership*** and	Resides with institution High control	Shared ownership control
• ***Evaluation***	External Expert-led Summative	Participatory Continuous Process oriented Formative
• ***Status***	Formal accreditation Mainstreamed	Often non-accredited Marginalised
• ***Trust***	Low Trust Low discretion Protecting backs Risk avoidance Discourages participation	High trust High discretion Openness/honesty encouraged Permits/encourages risk-taking Promotes participation

It may be useful to focus on some of the significant differences, presented as a continuum, between both types of programmes, and it is important to emphasise that each issue was part of a broader learning process for those personally involved in the Northside Initiative. From the university perspective, many aspects of the traditional role of the university, its modes of programme development, forms of assessment and evaluation, one-way style of communication with students, sense of institutional ownership of learning, and status in society, were challenged, formally and informally, during the partnership process. It may well be that universities, as organisations, are similar to individuals in terms of their 'status passage' as they move from one social position to another. The words of Glasser and Strauss (1971) resonated with this writer as he reflected on his institution's role and 'status passage' in the partnership process with disadvantaged/excluded communities on Cork's Northside, viz., *"ongoing process involving development of strategies, adjustments, negotiations, relationships and interactions, while meeting new problems, commitments and situations which form social change"*. Perhaps, the university as an institution, akin to individual behaviour, possesses its own 'life-world' (to borrow from Schutz, 1973), in which it maintains a number of societal positions and roles based on its conferred status, dominant ideology, historical position and socio-cultural obligations. In the changing and challenging phases of open and full partnership the navigation of these 'life-world' roles and positions shift and balance against each other, sometimes disruptively.

Furthermore, in seeking to bring out 'the darkside' of this educational challenge, Stephen Brookfield's (1994) analysis of the demands of individual adult learning may have some institutional application. The increased and deeper sets of relationships with excluded communities, consideration of challenging ideas, and the development of empathic understanding (almost solidarity) with the partners, were always likely to challenge established university certainties, traditions, and modes of behaviour. Brookfield uses the

term 'lost innocence' to describe this process at the individual level and that concept may easily transfer to an institutional setting. While open partnership has the potential to enhance institutional empowerment, it may also induce institutional confusion and anxiety which may in turn lead to a rejection of the partnership and its recommendations. The university institution, if and when pressed to fully mainstream and integrate innovative proposals, may perceive itself as discarding an old and trusted **modus operandi** without adequate compensatory structures and practices. This may cause the institution to seek the comfort of old assurances and reject the consequences and implications of open partnership in educational development with excluded communities.

The ongoing partnership interactions with other community groups have highlighted also the importance of proceeding in a thoughtful and structured series of stages and steps. McGivney's (1990) six stage process of access facilitation provided a pathway to follow, viz.,

- Targeting
- Contact and communication
- Consultation and negotiation
- Programme development
- Programme implementation
- Progression

The six-stage process lays heavy emphasis on the importance of full and open communication before any consideration is given to programme development and implementation. It highlights, **inter alia**, that:

- Special targeting is essential if opportunities are to be extended to excluded sectors, who may experience a significant cultural divide between their norms, values and educational expectations and those reflected in the education system.
- To attract non-participating adults from excluded communities requires addressing, at first contact stage, by listening and sharing, some of the ingrained attitudes and perceptions engendered by factors such as socio-economic background, community circumstances, personal disabilities, lack of confidence and self-esteem, and lack of trust in the system.

- Work with excluded communities requires a basic shift away from what has been termed the 'come and get it' approach towards outreach methods and strategies. 'Outreach' has been described as a process:

  > *"Whereby people who would not normally use adult education are contacted in non-institutional settings and become involved in attending, and eventually in jointly planning and controlling activities, schemes and courses relative to their circumstances and needs". (Ward, 1986, p. 3).*

  Thus, outreach is not merely, programme provision in a number of locations, geographically distant from the campus, but a proactive process of socio-educational engagement.

- The involvement of new, traditionally under-represented, groups in the adult learning process requires patient consultation, dialogues and negotiation of **their** learning needs, interests and requirements and must take place on a basis of **mutual equality and respect.** All aspects of the learning process for adults should be negotiated in advance, not just the form and nature of provision but methods of delivery, styles of learning, modes of evaluation, etc.

- The starting point for programme development is ***"working from where people are, using their environment, issues and concerns as a basis for development".***

Full partnership of mutual respect and high trust is the only basis for the development and consideration of these and many other issues.

In many respects this six-stage process has been integrated into practical community education projects facilitated by the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education in the University. Many initiatives, such as the innovative Diploma in Social Studies, Certificate in Housing Estate Management, Certificate in Non-Formal Guidance, were developed using McGivneys developmental process of access facilitation. Interestingly, recruitment of learners for these and other similarly developed programmes has never presented difficulty given the sense of community ownership and prior commitment. The six-stage process, in addition to the structural steps, is animated by many of the partnership characteristics outlined later such as open communication, building high trust, shared decision-making, etc.

Thus, the practice in community empowerment programme development has shown the value of being guided by the structure and spirit of McGivney's process.

3. *BACKGROUND, RATIONALE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CORK NORTHSIDE PARTNERSHIP*

In 1992, the Cork Northside Education Initiative was established in response to calls for a project which would specifically target the educational needs of adults on the Northside of Cork City. The Northside of Cork City is an area of major social and economic disadvantage, with very high levels of unemployment, dependency and early school leaving, and low levels of take-up of further education. It may be argued that many Northside residents are experiencing **social exclusion**, a concept which embraces the dynamics of poverty and disadvantage.

Brian Harvey, in his evaluation of the Third EU Poverty Programme in Ireland, **Combating Exclusion** (1994) defines social exclusion as:

> *"the structures and processes which exclude persons and groups from their full participation in society. It explains that poverty does not just happen: it flows directly from the economic policies and the choices which society makes about how resources are used and who has access to them .... Social exclusion may take a combination of forms - economic, social, cultural, legal - with multiple effects. The term exclusion has connotations of process, focusing on the forces by which particular categories of people are closed off from the rights, benefits and opportunities of modern society. Social exclusion is not just about lack of money, but may be about isolation, lack of work, lack of educational opportunities, even discrimination". (pp. 3-4).*

The people on the Northside of the city, who are most in need of the benefits which education can bring, are cut off from these benefits due to factors which are largely beyond their control. These factors may include unemployment, poverty, lack of an educational tradition within the families and communities in which they live, and experience of discrimination through the operation of the educational system. When these factors combine

it can be exceedingly difficult for people experiencing them to reach, or indeed aspire, to the higher levels of the educational system. It was within this broad context of circumstances that University College Cork engaged in a partnership and negotiated learning process, a process which, in a positive and challenging way, caused the institution to reflect deeply upon its role and contribution to local society.

In this section the writer seeks to contextualise and outline the development of the Northside social and educational inclusion partnership process, which was undertaken and motivated, not as a pragmatic institutional response to declining numbers, the demographic pendulum has not swung that far yet in Ireland, but on the basis of social equity and educational inclusion. The support of the President of my University and other colleagues was a vitally important factor in pursuit of this goal. As was noted earlier, participation by the Irish University sector in partnership with socially excluded/ disadvantaged communities is a relatively unexplored form of socio-educational engagement for that institution. In some respects, the concept 'partnership' has, or may, become an educational cliché, an almost dubious euphemism to include any association or relationship, however tenuous, between a university and a community of learners. Partnership, in the Cork Northside Initiative context, was animated on the basis of the following characteristics:

- **a two-way process of open communication** (much emphasis on interpersonal communication) e.g. active listening;
- **a shared unity of purpose** (broader socio-educational purpose);
- **high trust and mutual respect** (equality of roles, contributions and partners);
- **willingness to negotiate** ('win-win basis');
- **sharing of information, decision-making and responsibility** (emphasis on the first person plural 'we' nature of the project);
- **community and individual empowerment process** (dualism in approach).

Essentially, we sought to develop a symbiotic relationship, i.e. a mutually beneficial partnership between organisms of different kinds. This relationship involved, in as far as was possible, local residents and all statutory and voluntary providers of education on Cork's Northside.

Ab initio, the Northside Education Initiative viewed education as playing a crucial role in the process of social *inclusion* or *integration*, but this role depended very much on how education was organised and delivered.

> *"If organised according to principles of justice, solidarity, and equity, the education system can ensure access to education by all social groups, minorities, geographical areas, all ages and both genders. Education can provide new opportunities for training, reintegration to the workforce and training for citizenship participation".*
>
> *(Harvey, p.46).*

It was in the concept of social inclusion that the Northside Education Initiative was interested, and in the idea of an educational intervention based on the following characteristics:

(i) Social commitment, or a commitment to social change through education.
(ii) Accessibility to all members of the community.
(iii) Opportunities for full and open participation in the intervention by the members of the target population, so that they are in control of the educational process, rather than its victims or subjects.
(iv) Attention to the best conditions for learning to take place. These conditions may include induction, confidence-building, and the use of teaching methods conducive to learning, collective awareness, and community empowerment.

The strategy proposed in this partnership initiative constituted a focused and integrated intervention which included the course provision currently provided by different agencies. The consultation process had identified the importance of the establishment of an integrated education strategy, involving a physical centre on the Northside. The strategy would be based on the principles of social inclusion, open access, outreach, progressive accreditation,

and the idea of life-long learning. Engagement with local communities and individual was a core part of this strategy.

A process of consultation and dialogue was undertaken by the Northside Education Initiative and involved meetings (23) with a variety of voluntary and statutory bodies operating on the Northside, and the organization of a series of seminars and conferences (9) on issues relating to access to education and equality of educational opportunity. A myriad of meetings with individuals constituted a further dimension of the partnership process.

In Summer, 1996, the report of the Initiative was launched in the Firkin Crane Centre on Cork's Northside by Dr. Mortell, President, U.C.C. This report, **Making Education Work on Cork's Northside: A Strategy Statement**, has formed the basis and framework for ongoing discussions between the various interests as they work toward a further stage in the partnership. U.C.C., through the work of the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education in close cooperation with the Department of Applied Social Studies, offers a wide range of Certification and Diploma programmes, as well as the B.Soc.Sc. (Youth and Community Work) in various community education centres on Cork's Northside. Approximately 17% of Diplomates over the past 4 years from this area are now engaged in a range of mainstream degree programmes in the University.

4. SOME NATIONAL ISSUES

A review of Irish national policy and research documentation on inequality/exclusion in education reveals a number of recurrent themes. First, it has been established that the longer that students stay within the educational system, the greater the chance they will have to find employment. Second, higher education is dominated by the higher socio-economic groups, at the expense of students from working class backgrounds. A third and related point is that

there is a significantly higher rate of transference to higher education among the higher socio-economic groups than among students from unskilled and semi-skilled backgrounds, suggesting that disparities manifest themselves at stages before third level. Fourth, while socio-economic inequalities exist throughout the higher education sector, they are most pronounced in the universities, which are seen as the most prestigious third level institutions. Fifth, and of crucial importance, social group disparities in higher education have their roots in a number of factors, including the influence of socio-economic background and community attitudes, and become manifest throughout primary and second level education. Finally, there is a need for a coordinated national policy to address the financial and cultural dimensions of the problem of socio-economic inequality in higher education.

5. *SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS*

The process of partnership, of the symbiotic relationship kind adverted to earlier, has placed the University on an important institutional learning curve in its interactions with this very important cohort of learners. One of the central issues which has been negotiated, perhaps not to everyone's satisfaction all the time, relates to the sensitive and central issue of ownership and control of the learning engagement. An educational institution, like a university, with its traditions and reputation in guaranteeing the quality of its accredited awards may legitimate the innovative, flexible, well-focused and formative programmes already in existence in community settings in such a manner as to drain the community of some of its most important assets. One sensed this issue in the defensive manner, in which community activists jealously guarded their own sterling programme of personal development and community education. The symbolic importance of university recognition, but not control, of such valuable community-based learning was obvious on many occasions.

In summary, the positive aspects of this project of socio-educational partnership, include:

- The development of a cohort of Adult Role Models in an excluded community
- Progressive ladder of accreditation
- Full partnership in programme design and implementation
- Participative methodology which recognises and values participants' educational/life experiences and perceptions
- Build on/with existing foundations in the community
- Provision of a wide range of services
- Share ownership of learning
- Build high trust

Thus, partnership has been an enriching and challenging developmental experience at the institutional and community levels.

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